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(dated) 9/10/81

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(dated) August 17, 1981

Accepted for the Oakland Neighborhood History Project

by

(Project Director) (Dated)

Oakland Neighborhood History Project

Interview with Robert Valva
Date of Interview: 17 August, 1981; Oakland, California
Interviewer: Sally Thomas
Transcriber: Sally Thomas

Begin Tape 1, Side One

Notes and Partial Transcription

0-5 minutes | 0-50 counter

Thomas: Your father came from Italy when he was sixteen years old, in 1917. Where was he from?

Valva: A place called Joggiano, a little providence about a hundred miles from Rome — near Rome and Naples — up in the hills, in the mountains. So he wasn't from a big city. This was a small farm town. He used to tell me: big night, Saturday night, for the young people, was just to go down town, walk back and forth, up and down town for a couple hours, and talk to each other, and go home. You didn't dare take any of the girls out — you'd get in trouble. (laughter) He came here when he was 16 years old with the help of his uncle who financed him, who lived partly in San Francisco and had relatives here in Oakland. So when he first came here he settled on Union Street with very close friends of his uncle — and stood there until he'd get on his own. Of course that's what

they all did when they first came here from the old country. They just stood with friends and relatives 'cuz they couldn't speak English. The first thing he did was, when he came here, he just made up his mind, "I'm gonna come here and become an American citizen." So he started going to school right away.

Thomas: Where did he go to school?

Valva: Tompkins School, which was a grammar school down here. In those days they had schools for foreigners — they'd teach them the languages — they had a lot of 'em coming in. A lot of the local schools had night classes to get your citizenship papers. So they had classes in the languages and so forth that'd teach you English. And from this he met my mother who was born and raised in Oakland — on 3rd and Adeline Street. Her family had come from the old country from the same town. Her name was Mazza. Most of the Mazzas settled in New York. Some came to Oakland, California. She had a few relatives here. So my father and she met, and got married. In those days the women were quite young when they got married. She was between fourteen

and sixteen years old. That was normal then. Now if your daughter got married at sixteen you'd say, "You're a cradle snatcher." Huh?" (laughter)

When he first came here he went to work for a laundry — a delivery boy for a laundry. Then he had several jobs in gas stations, and whatever he could do. He worked in a mortuary for a while — any different jobs he could get going while he was going to school. Then later he had his own gas station on 8th and Market Street, another one on 7th and Myrtle. (He didn't have two, but one at a time.) And then he ended up with a small hardware store on 7th Street, between Market and Myrtle Street — which is now Oak Center.

5-10 minutes | 50-100 counter

Next to him was an old timer who had a real estate office. He was quite old, and he became good friends with my father, and he convinced my father to take over his real estate business. In those days you just took 'em over — you didn't really buy 'em — you just took 'em over. Then you went down to the court house, and you'd raise your right hand, and say, "I swear to be a good citizen, and go by the rules of the United States."
"Can you read and write?"
"Yes." And you got your real estate

license for two dollars, or whatever the fee was. So that started the real estate business. That was before World War II.

So in the meantime when all this was happening he got married to my mother. First he had Bill (William) Valva, and then next he had Bob (Robert) Valva, that's myself, and then next he had Bernice Valva, which is our sister. So we were born and raised in West Oakland, went to Tompkins School, Lowell, and McClymond's School, which are all in West Oakland. My sister went to grammar school here, and then went to Holy Names High School, which is a Catholic girls' school.

Thomas: Why don't I back-track a little bit — your father was on 7th Street with his hardware store. When he took over the real estate office he was still located on 7th Street? What was 7th Street like in those days?

Valva: If you take 7th Street from Broadway all the way down 7th Street, down to Pine Street, it was one of the main streets.

Businesses lined both sides of the street. There was a Bank of America at 7th and Adeline

There was an American Trust which became Wells Fargo on 7th and Henry. 7th Street was just like Broadway and Washington became later.

"The thing that I remember as a child is that we were in the neighborhood, and we could name everybody in five or ten square blocks who lived in the houses. We were neighborhood families. We knew everybody because not having any money, and the transportation wasn't the same as it is now, we all played in our own neighborhood. We all went to the same schools, played baseball together, went to churches together."

address: 520 Castro Street

The Valvas lived on Castro between 5th & 6th Street, now the freeway. Across the street on one corner was the Sacco (?) Grocery Store. Across the street on the other corner was a Clerizio (?) Grocery Store. On the other corner was the Splendorio (?) Grocery Store. All of these stores were Italian owned. The Valvas lived in the upstairs flat — the owners lived on the ground floor, Italian.

10-15 minutes | 100-160 counter

On the right side of their home lived a black family. Next to them was a Mexican family, Venezuela. Across the street on the corner were three Chinese families.
On 4th and Castro there were about 3 Japanese families.

Around the corner from the Valvas lived three Jewish families. And there were Greeks.

100 "We had what you'd call a real mixed breed - all foreign families. . . . West Oakland was a melting pot."

Valva considered West Oakland below West Grand, and from Grove Street to Pine

Down on 7th and Henry was the West of Market Boys' Club. In San Francisco was the South of Market Boys' Club. They had a lot of activities together.

"We didn't have to leave our neighborhoods to have fun. Everything was down here for us."

"The whole of West Oakland was our neighborhood because there was one high school, one junior high, and several grammar schools."

The key system was on 7th Street — ran all the way to the pier. The kids didn't use that to get to school, though, they walked to school.

"They had a nickel ferry that went from the foot of Washington Street to San Francisco.

→

"That was passengers only, there wasn't cars. Sometimes that would be our joy ride for the day. We'd get on the nickel ferry and go back and forth for several hours on the ocean. That was our big cruise. We used to call that our own private yacht."

They used the Key System train for joy riding, too.

"Of course our joy riding isn't what we call joy riding today. We didn't tear the trains apart. We had fun. We didn't want to wreck our own things. If we wrecked our own playground we didn't have it to play with. Now they wreck their own playground and think it's funny."

There was a Bachelor's Club at Saint Mary's. Members were Hal Schneider, Frank and Mike Pena, Sam Sarubbi, Roy Lipanovich and others — about 10 or 15 fellows, and 10 gals — all from the neighborhood, from 14-18 years old.

"We created our own activities."

They had baseball teams — invited other schools.

15-20 minutes | 160-225 counter

Used Jefferson Park for a playground, also used Tompkins School for a playground.
Had competitions between Cole School, Lafayette

and Hoover Junior High, and the churches — Sacred Heart, St. Francis de Sales, St. Joseph's, St. Patrick's.

On 14th Street was the Jewish Center — was a temple as well as a social hall — they had a basketball court they used.

The Greek Center was on 9th Street (Their Church and Hall.)

Chinese Centers were on 8th Street — Chinatown.

"Not having much money, we had to have activities that didn't cost anything."

Didn't know of any discrimination because they all came from the same social class — poor.

"Nobody owned anything better than the other fellow did."

About 50/50 for renters/homeowners.

Valva remembers their rent ranging from $20 - $30/month, which was considered a lot of money. His family rented the same flat for about 18, 19 years.

There were always bullies in the neighborhood, "but that was true anyplace."

Valva remembers George Baker, an enemy — they had a fight once-a-month. George was black, but that's not why they didn't like each other.

20-25 minutes | 225-300 counter

Valva's father made a lot of money during the war when a lot of people moved into West Oakland. And his parents were great savers.

"In those days you didn't buy it first, then pay for it later. When you wanted a washing machine, you saved the money first, then you bought it."

So when the Valva brothers came back from the war, it was time to move — they had the money. So they moved to Lake Park, off of Lakeshore, above MacArthur. They bought the house there — their first home. One by one the Valvas got married — first Bernice, then Bob, then Bill. Then they all moved out of the house. None of them married Italians - Bob married a Norwegian, Bill married an Irish woman and Bernice married an English man. They were all from Oakland.

Then his mother moved — the house was too big. They built a four-plex off of High Street near St. Lawrence O'Toole Church. She had one,

and rented the three others out. She's still there, and that was about 30 years ago she moved in.

People moved out of the neighborhoods when the children grew up.

In West Oakland the shipyard workers moved in

"West Oakland has always been the poorer part of town, and that's where the people who first come here start, then build up to the other neighborhoods."

When the blacks came, and often working 24 hour shifts, some families shared one apartment, alternating — because there weren't enough units for everyone.

25-30 minutes | 300-385 counter

Basements and garages were converted into apartments as well.

"West Oakland was where the poor people came to start. . . . It's still that way."

But under redevelopment many of the houses have been fixed up, so people don't want to move.

Most of the Italians moved North when Bob Valva was small, to Temescal.

The Mexican and Spanish moved to the South part of East Oakland. Blacks moved to the North side of East Oakland. The furthe North, the more expensive the homes were, likewise for the furthe East.

The school qualities, regardless of neighborhood, were just as good.

30-32 minutes | 385-430 counter

Oakland High and Fremont High had richer students, but the quality of teaching was the same.

Bob remembers Miss Rossello.

Bob knows the quality was good because there are many successful lawyes and business people, as well as Nick Petris, who graduated from those schools.

"It seems like West Oakland is something that everyone has fond memories of growing up, was fun."

Begin Side Two

0-5 minutes | 0-50 counter

Went to church at Old St. Mary's on 7th & Jefferson, then went to Our Lady of Lourde's when they moved to Lakeshore. Now goes to St. Lawrence O'Toole's.

There were 3 Catholic churches — St. Mary's, St. Joseph's and St. Patrick's. Another one, too.
You went to the parish of your neighborhood — 5 or 6 square blocks.

Had neighborhood dances in the parish hall to raise money.

Martin Page (Martin Page) a music writer in L.A. who writes for Sinatra is from this neighborhood. His band played for their dances.
They raised money by charging to get into the dance, and by selling popcorn, soft drinks and hot dogs as refreshments.

From that money they could hire a bus to take the Bachelor Club to Santa Cruz

"One thing we were taught in our day was to be self-sufficient. You couldn't get it from your folks. They didn't have it to give you if they wanted."

Bob had a paper & magazine route to earn money to buy a bicycle.

Bob's mother worked in the canneries in Fruitvale.

St. Vincent's Day Home was a baby sitting place for the children after school and pre-school. (It's still there & still used for the same purpose.)

St. Vincent's was Catholic, but took care of children of all faiths. It was simply for children of poor families.

Shopped at the Housewives Market between 5th & 6th and Washington and Clay. Did most of the shopping weekly. Corner grocery stores were for things like milk.

5-10 minutes | 50-100 Counter

Jack's Meat Market across the street. The Housewives Market was open all day Wednesday, 6 am - 6 pm; Friday from noon to 6 pm and all day Saturday. It covered a whole block — people came from all over. Individually owned stands, many from the neighborhood. This was a bargain place, too.

"It was fun listening to them bargain over prices. And they did bargain."

Remembers Rutto's. Most of the grocery stores were Italian-owned. Most of the restaurants were Greek-owned.

10th Street Market (now called Swan's) — same idea.

Most of the stands were run by Jewish, like the ham and bacon stands. Chicken stands were mostly Italian-run. Rabbis killed the animals for Jewish people.

Bob used to make a nickel for each store he hit for Jewish on Saturdays after sundown.

As kids they crashed each others' parties, even parties for specific religious or ethnic celebrations.

10-15 minutes | 100-160 counter

"Anyplace that served a free soda or hot dog — this was heaven to us."

All the kids had jobs to raise money — they weren't lazy.

Sold Saturday Evening Posts and Liberty Magazines — (didn't sell newspapers) they were handled early in the morning and after school on Wednesdays and Thursdays.

Also sold the seconds from the Grandma Cookie Company. Bought big bags full of them, then put them in smaller bags and sold them.
Went down to the docks to sell magazines and cookies and shoeshine for the sailors and longshoremen.

The biggest money-make was the Mother's Day Celebration.

" Mother's Day in those days was a real popular day, almost like Christmas. For Mother's Day they had the white carnation and the red carnation. If your mother was dead you wore a white carnation, if your mother was alive you wore a red carnation."

Could buy carnations on Saturday to make into corsages to sell on Sunday at Old St. Mary's.

"We ended up having 15 or 20 kids working for us at all the different churches around. ... This became a big business for us for a while."

They made $100-$200 a piece between the two brothers.

Bill and Bob Valva are known as hustlers.

After the war the Valva brothers went to a business school to get their real estate licenses — went to Golden Gate College in San Francisco, (like Merritt), to get their insurance licenses

They never discussed whether or not they'd go into real estate — they just did.

15-20 minutes | 160-225 counter

Valva's father took the business over from Mackey (sp?) on 7th Street, address was 908 7th Street between Market and Myrtle. Then moved one block down, between Myrtle and Filbert, address: 960 7th Street. He was at that location for many years.

When Oak Center came in, redevelopment, they moved to 14th Street, across the street from the present location. When the freeway came in they bought 2 old houses on the present location & built the new office.

Bill worked in the field with his father, Bob worked as secretary in the office. Business has slowly expanded since then.

At one time they had a separate insurance office on Harrison — had it for a couple of years, then sold it about 8 years ago. They couldn't do it all.

They also do property management. Their business has moved with their customers. Do business mostly in Oakland, some in Berkeley.

Bob Valva is on the Oakland Real Estate Board ~~Redevelopment~~ Site committee — its purpose is to take all commercial & industrial

brokers in Oakland and concentrate on keeping businesses in Oakland and bringing businesses in, expanding.

Bob has been active on this committee for 5 years, was been chairman for the last 2 years.

20-25 minutes | 225-300 counter

"It gets back down to little Bill and Bob Valva from Castro Street who didn't have a dime have done very well, from Oakland. We feel obligated to this, so we also put back to Oakland. And as we make Oakland successful, the more successful we become. It goes hand in hand."

Valva Realty had hard times until they started to move into other neighborhoods, and prices went up.

As Oakland got "rougher", most realtors moved out—
Rubinos, Moores, Jones, Miller
but Valva stayed.

Business started picking up about 15 years ago.

For years the commission was 5%—now it's 6%.

25-30 minutes | 300-385 counter

Valva handles "problem property" all over Oakland.

So what originally hurt their business, now helps them.

problem property means rough tenants, unpaying tenants

Wants to stay in Oakland — improve it.

Family went to San Francisco for fancy stuff.

"You never thought of going to San Francisco without a shirt and tie on."

Did special shopping in S.F. Went to see Christmas displays.

"My kids still brag about being Italian."

30-32 minutes | 385-430 counter

"You were either a lousy or a lazy Italian if you didn't have a vegetable garden."

Neighbors got together to make wine — shared vegetables

"The one thing that they argued over is whose wine is better. That was the biggest argument you ever heard."

Begin Tape Two, Side One

0-5 minutes | 0-50 counter

Bob hung out with 3 clans — with Hal Schneide and the Jewish clan, the Greek clan, and the Italians

Greek name, Saints' names holidays

But even though he hung out with a lot of different groups, dating was somewhat limited — couldn't ask a Chinese girl out

But Catholics were lucky because there were a lot of different nationalities in the Catholic church.

Bob's main Italian friend was Joe Serubi. The Serubis lived at 5th and Linden Streets. (Where Tompkins School was)

Went to Campbell School for kindergarten before it was torn down — located at Grove, between 3rd and 4th (or 4th & 5th Streets)

5-10 minutes | 50-100 counter

There were 78 students in Bob's graduating high school class — smallest in Oakland.

Explains Senior Graduation Book. In those days graduated every 6 months — in January and June.

- looks at photos on wall — the hardware store — everything on consignment, so it was easy to close down. Valva Hardware was there for about 3 years — sponsored a baseball team, a semi-pro ball team.

10-15 minutes | 100-160 counter

a hat was passed around during games to help support the visiting team — Valva's team was undefeated for 2 years

In the '20s and '30s, a lot of the top ballplayers were from West Oakland.

Another photo — card game night on Saturday — all men wore ties, women sat in the kitchen and talked — names them all — all Italian — all from the same home town

have been active in Catholic associations.

Sailor suit photo — grown up and as babies — boys went into the Coast Guard

15-20 minutes | 160-225 counter

photo of Nick Petris — with the Valvas — was at the Greek Cente

photo of Fatte — football game ~~men~~ ; Cal vs. St. Mary's — policeman made a bet with Fatte — his Fatte lost, had to pull the cat in the parade

Now 2 son-in-laws work for Valva — Mike Bresso (?) — started 10 years ago and Bruce Chambers (his mother is Italian)

and David Valva started working about 3 months ago.
and Michael Valva (Bill's son) has worked for Valva for 3 years.

Hal Schneider talked about — he's a reminiscer (sp?)

"Oakland, as I repeat, was good to my father, was good to us, and we try to be good to it. That's Oakland. . . . I'm glad, till I die, that I was born and raised in West Oakland because I have more friends than if I had been born in East or North Oakland."

End of Interview